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ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues related to the role of preschool education in Norway. Two dominant philosophies of preschool education are identified, the first emphasizing the importance of play opportunities and the social environment of the preschool, and the second focusing on the importance of adequate pedagogical programs for optimum cognitive stimulation. Opinions on the proper relationship between the preschool and the primary school are presented from proponents of each philosophy. Trends contributing to the current emphasis on cognitive development in the preschool are traced and the role of the preschool in compensatory education is discussed. Assumptions about the deficiencies of children who are the targets of compensatory preschool education are examined and the research of Piaget, Bernstein and others on the development of language and thought in the normal child is reviewed. Finally, the question of whether pedagogical interventions can compensate for deficient development is addressed and some of the characteristics of a stimulating preschool environment are discussed. (JMB)

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Co-operation between Parents, Pre-school and the Community :

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF PRE-SCHOOL

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COMMITTEE FOR GENERAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Co-operation between parents, pre-school and the community:

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF PRE-SCHOOL *)

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*) Most of the problems discussed in the present paper are of relevance for both nursery school and kindergarten, but we have consequently used the term "nursery school" instead of the clumsy phrase "nursery school/kindergarten". In Norwegian, the term "barnehage" covers all activities organised for small children until the start of compulsory education (which begins at seven in Norway).

INTRODUCTION

Education for children of pre-school age is the subject of lively debate both in Norway and in many other industrial countries. Changes in society itself, as well as within the family, are important factors influencing new directions in nursery education. Another important factor is recent knowledge in the field of child development.

These influences are apparent in the new Norwegian law regarding pre-school education (1974-75). This law opens the possibility for different new approaches. At a time when different approaches are possible, the need for research obviously increases. There is need for research aimed at analysis and evaluation of the various nursery school philosophies.

In Norway, several investigations have been conducted concerning various aspects of nursery schools. (1) However, most of these investigations have taken up what we will call the structural qualities of the nursery school. By this, we mean that these studies have concentrated on the quality of the nursery school buildings, the turnover in staff etc. (2) Until recently there has been less concern with the pedagogical content of the education.

However, in one investigation completed in 1972 these questions were examined tentatively. (3) In this investigation, factors influencing education practice were mapped and discussed in the light of various developmental theories. The aim was to study the effect of the various factors and ascertain their effect on the children's development and welfare.

We will consider this study in some detail because it:

1. demonstrated the necessity of a general and critical discussion of the content and aims of nursery school education;

2. the results represented a relevant contribution to the debate on nursery school education which is going on in Norway as well as in Europe generally.

Partly as an extension of this study, partly as an attempt at clarifying the debate on the new Norwegian law regarding pre-school education, a study was undertaken in order the analyse in a more systematic manner the relationship between, on the one hand, the different points of view on small children's living conditions and social welfare, and, on the other hand, what is known theoretically and empirically about children's development in general. (4)

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This study was meant partly as a continuation of the '72 study and partly as an attempt to clarify the debate on the new Norwegian law on nursery school education. It is clear that in a short summary one cannot present the many aspects of the situation of children which have to be considered in a more comprehensive theoretical work. It has to be mentioned that this attempt, to synthesise knowledge about childrens' actual life situations with understanding based on the various theoretical traditions, is by no means completed. At present, we have not yet completed the analysis of all the data which have been collected to illustrate some of the problems to be discussed in more detail later on. Because of this we will restrict ourselves to one issue from the project only. The topic to be discussed here is :

What sort of educational opportunity is appropriate for pre-school children from varying socio-cultural backgrounds ?

Until recently, it has been assumed that the best education for a child is one which teaches it, as early as possible, to adjust to the socio-cultural demands and values dominant in society at large. In Europe and Scandinavia, homogeneity of cultural values has been implicit in the practice throughout the sector of nursery school education. It is this that has prompted us in this project to attempt to clarify the problems and to question the validity of this position. We will mainly exemplify our discussion of this problem with Norwegian examples, but will also draw parallels to international research and debate. A clarification of the values implicit in the nursery school educational practice is necessary if one is to evaluate and perhaps change the function of the nursery school in relation to society and the local environment of which it is a part.

ON CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES

Children as a group are rather helpless when it comes to defending their specific interests. If their situation is to be improved they are entirely dependent on others to represent them. This dependency on others, makes them - as a group - especially vulnerable and weak. It is thus of the utmost importance that their spokesmen have detailed knowledge about their situation and developmental environment.

It is also important to realise that the various professional groups who take it upon themselves to represent childrens' interests, are, due to differing theoretical background and training, necessarily concerned with widely differing and often restricted aspects of the child's environment. Furthermore, it is obvious, that the different professional groups will hold different opinions of what is important in the environment of the child.

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In this connection it is interesting to note that, in both the Norwegian and the European debate, there seem to exist two different opinions on the necessary components in a child's environment.

1. The first view emphasises the importance of the children's pleasure and play opportunities. In addition the provision of care for children whose parents are at work is being stressed. This has been termed the socio/political approach.

2. The second view emphasises the importance of adequate pedagogical programmes. This is supposed to be easiest achieved when the nursery school is organised by, and connected to, the general educational system.

Due to the fact that there seems to be considerable disagreement as to what are the most important factors in the upbringing of small children, it is perhaps useful to analyse and try to understand the two different dominant viewpoints. In our opinion, it is important to clarify the relationship between these differing points of view and the knowledge we have about children's needs and development. In this connection we will attempt to show how the two points of view have developed from different professional disciplines and traditions.

We will begin by considering one of many issues which came up in Norway during the debate on the new law on nursery school education. Analysing this example, we will hopefully uncover values, theoretical view-points, and concrete experiences on which the various opinions were based.

ON TRANSITION FROM, AND CO-OPERATION BETWEEN, NURSERY SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLS PROPER

Questions concerning the relationship between the schools and the nursery schools, have been increasingly a subject of concern for politicians, parents and professional workers alike. Subjects such as the transition from nursery school to school, continuity in the two institutions, as well as the provision of special programmes for six year olds (in Norway the six year olds of pre-school age), are among the most central issues in the debate. For this reason, it may be useful to study in some detail how the different organisations, professional and lay groups look at these problems.

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THE PRE-SCHOOL YEAR

The Norwegian education act of 13 June 1969 gives town and county authorities the possibility of establishing pre-school classes for 6 year olds in connection with junior schools. (In Norway, children begin school at 7).

To quote from the law:

"The Ministry of Education agrees to the establishment of optional classes in the year before compulsory school begins and after the 9th obligatory school year, i.e. a 10th class."

Up to the present, there are only two counties which to some extent have established such pre-school classes in connection with junior schools. However, many politicians, professional and parent groups are interested in the development of special educational programmes for children in the year previous to compulsory school attendance at seven. There are various reasons why so many are of the opinion that education at this particular stage is so important. Let us approach the debate by quoting from a Norwegian newspaper :

"There will be no play groups in Lyftingsmo school. 'The Children's association' in Lesja has bowed to opposition from pupils' parents with regard to the organisation of groups for six-year olds at the school during the lesson time. Other possible locations are being tried instead, and the old school house at Lora will probably be taken into use. As a temporary measure, the play group for that part of the district has begun in the old school at Kjøremgrenda. Ten children made this long journey to participate in the first morning programme yesterday....

The 'Children's association' had a committee meeting on Tuesday to discuss the situation created by the education committee's decision. However, this case is so complicated that it will be taken up at a new committee meeting before a final letter is sent to the education committee.

Apart from the question of the use of Lyftingsmo school, it is the education committee's decision to demand discipline, timetables and "school" activities, which has led to some doubt on the part of the leaders in the 'Children's association'. The education committee is of the opinion that activities which occur in the school's premises during the school day should be in accordance with the aims of the school. One of the things that was mentioned was that school children who had attended the play groups were rather too uninhibited when they started school.

We are surprised that there is a demand for discipline and subjects, said the president of the Children's association, Henriette Grova. - It is the social aspect, to create an atmosphere which encourages play that we feel is the most important". (our italics).

This newspaper clipping shows clearly how the parents, the children's association, and the education committee in Lesja county, disagree as to the purposes and the content of the play groups for six-year olds. Furthermore, it is obvious that the conflict is between a traditional pedagogical approach and an approach which emphasises pleasure and play opportunities.

The above example shows clearly that some local educational authorities in Norway assume that it is the ideology and practice of the schools proper, which should represent the basis for the planning and evaluation of the various educational programmes for pre-school children. The use of school buildings is even used an an argument as to why pre-school children should be offered a programme very similar to the junior school.

This way of arguing forces us to pose the following more basic questions :

1. Is a child in the pre-school age group necessarily best served by the same type of educational programme as that which is appropriate for a 7 year old in the first class at compulsory school ?

2. Is it really the case that small children and their parents feel that what is missing in their everyday situation is training for adaptation to the demands of the schools ?

Obviously the above example cited from general debate cannot answer these and related questions in any depth. In an attempt to explain why so many choose to concentrate on just these aspects, we will now examine a Nordic research co-operation project which chose to concentrate on such issues.

It is necessary to keep in mind that decisions taken regarding these questions will have an effect, not only on how the nursery school will be organised, but also on children's mutual interactions, and on the relationship between the nursery school and the children's parents.

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RESEARCH IN SCANDINAVIA AND THE REST OF EUROPE ON THE PRE-SCHOOL YEAR AND ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NURSERY SCHOOL AND THE SCHOOL

The Nordic Council has decided that one of its aims is to illuminate problems connected with the transition from nursery school to school proper. One of the results of this inter-Nordic co-operation was that a comprehensive survey was published in 1974.(5)

In connection with the Nordic projects, which are mainly concerned with the study of school-nursery school co-operation, this report states :

> "In addition to 'effect investigations' and other analyses, in connection with various aspects of child development and environment influences, most of the investigations aim at raising the level of cognitive content in nursery school education, as opposed to that which has existed previously." (our italics).

On the basis of the above, it would seem correct to conclude that Nordic research workers are also increasingly interested in problems connected with the transition from nursery school to school.

It would also appear that this shift of emphasis may be explained by a wish to develop an environment which can be more stimulating, both intellectually and cognitively.

In a report for the Council of Europe, Stukat sums up research results of European pre-school projects in the following manner. (6)

> "Even with a short period of time the pre-school research situation in Europe has changed considerably..... Another characteristic feature of present pre-school research is that it is often related to current national problems in education."

Stukat supposes that the trend towards a closer connection between school and nursery school stems from the following :

> "Within the education system the problem of how to prevent school failure has in many countries led to increased efforts at the pre-school level."

On the basis of what we have presented from Norwegian, Nordic and European sources we will conclude as follows :

There is an ever increasing tendency to integrate 0 - 7 year olds in society at large and especially into the general system of education. This change in attitude to early childhood has its origin in more recent assumptions and beliefs that the period of early childhood is very critical for the child's cognitive development - in other words the development of language and conceptual learning. It has also been argued that

society up until now has taken too little account of these facts. As a result, many children fail to develop intellectual resources satisfactorily when they begin school. This is perhaps the reason why they cannot manage to keep up in class. In this connection it has been suggested that there are special groups of children who do not manage to follow the ordinary school curriculum. It has been assumed that the homes from which these children come do not provide adequate intellectual stimulation. We will analyse this problem in more detail below.

At this point, we will emphasise that this recent view of the pre-school child has, in country after country, led to a discussion as to how one may intervene and stimulate cognitive and intellectual development. Most important has been the discussion about what kind of stimulations may prove useful in regard to these children whom, one assumes, receive too little intellectual stimulation at home.

In this connection, the nursery school has been delegated an enormously important role. In several countries, the content and structure of the nursery school have begun to be changed so that it can better provide for these new demands regarding intellectual and cognitive stimulation.

Although, during the '50s and '60s, the nursery school was conceived as a means of achieving greater equality between the sexes, in the '70s the idea that the nursery school might represent a political tool in the battle for social equality and justice has gained ground.

In short, it seems correct to conclude that the nursery school is, to an increasing extent, being understood as a political and educative weapon against cognitive stagnation. This should imply in the long run that social inequalities will gradually be evened out, because the nursery school will make up for deficient home environments. From the above review, it should be obvious that views on early childhood have changed in recent years. This, in turn, will have an effect on the planning and development of the educational opportunities provided for small children. The change of perspectives will also have consequences for those who work with small children. In this connection it is reasonable to assume that this will particularly affect the role of the pre-school teacher. Because of the current debate on the pre-school education system, it would seem useful to uncover systematically the values, theories and empirical experience on which the above different viewpoints depend. For a first approach, we will examine what the new Norwegian law on pre-school education has to say about the trend to integrate the nursery school with the school. Regarding the question of the transition from nursery school to school, the law states : (7)

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> "...is a question which cannot be solved by making the same paragraphs apply to both nursery school and school. In this connection there exist clashes of interest between different theoretical backgrounds and historical traditions, between different methods and activities as well as between different norms and aims".

And on the purposes of the pre-school education the law holds :

> "Nursery school education must not become exclusively interested in imparting knowledge and the child's intellectual development. As far as possible, one should aim at developing the total personality"

From the above quotations we can see that the new law either takes a wait-and-see attitude, or speaks out against the tendency to integrate pre-school education into the general school system.

As one might expect from what is said about the different points of view, this position obviously led to a difficult debate, mostly concentrated on the question of what a good pedagogical programme for those in the age group 0-7 years "really" is. It was claimed that the new law had given social/political considerations a higher priority than pedagogical considerations.

Taking as our point of departure the recent debate, we will now try to explain why there exist two seemingly quite different views on nursery school practice today. To carry out such an analysis it is also necessary to consider recent research on social inequality : on how the schools function with regard to children from different social backgrounds, and on the development of language and conceptual learning in childhood.

ON SOCIAL INEQUALITY, EMPHASISING COGNITIVE ACHIEVMENT, AND THE PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT OF THE NURSERY SCHOOL

Children in Norway grow up in different conditions with respect to socio-economic background and living conditions : play opportunities, number of brothers and sisters, access to peers, health conditions, etc.

The family with small children is characterised, to a lesser or greater extent, by conflicts and problems. In view of this, it would seem appropriate to ask just why the above issues and questions have a more central position in the debate on the new nursery school law ? Why do so many parents, researchers and administrators choose to emphasise questions connected to the cognitive development of children, to the question of whether the nursery school should be governed by regulations similar to the schools, on the transition from school to nursery school etc ? Is it really the case that only these problems are the most salient and vital ones in the everyday life of small children and their parents ?

However, it is quite clear that it is no accident that so many people - in spite of the fact that there exist great difficulties in managing the ordinary tasks of living - still emphasise the importance of just these aspects of small children's situation.

It is obvious that researchers, administrators and those employed in the nursery schools, are affected by the general attitudes and opinions of society at large. In other words, because of the fact that higher education and intellectual achievement are given high status in our society, it seems evident that the education offered to small children has to stimulate learning. An important question for all those who work with small children is obviously : - Will the situation of small children and their parents in Norway radically improve if the children are offered as early as possible educational opportunities which primarily stimulate intellectual and cognitive abilities ? Further, do we know that early systematic preparation for further education will help the child to manage better in school and in adult life ? Or, to put it another way : Will the nursery school teacher become a better teacher if he or she takes on the job of systematic stimulation of the child's conceptual and communicative abilities ? Furthermore, is it more important to do this than to concentrate on improving care and social welfare for the individual child ? And finally : Is there really anything mutually exclusive in establishing systematic cognitive stimulation programmes and creating an emotionally and socially optimal atmosphere for the children ?

In the introduction it was mentioned that different professions differ in their views on what are the most important factors regarding small children's welfare and living conditions. In Norway, nursery school teachers and junior school teachers have given very different priorities to the various types of activities. The school has primarily defined its function as one of imparting knowledge. Children's general social welfare and comfort has not been high on the school's priorities.

Contrary to the school proper, the nursery school has been characterised by : Children themselves controlling to a large extent what, in the pedagogical programme, they react to. The children themselves regulate most of their own activities and social relationships. And the emphasis is on the general development of the child, and less on the imparting of specific knowledge or the development of special abilities.

From the above, we have seen that there is an explicit wish to emphasise the necessity of greater similarity in the goals and tasks of schools proper and the nursery school.

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We have further noticed that it is implicitly assumed that it is the nursery school, not the school proper, which necessarily has to change in this integrating process. It would also appear that this tendency towards similarity is based on the assumption that the nursery school may assist the school in realising the ideal that all children, disregarding social and cultural background, have the same chance in life. In Norway at present, there is a lively political interest in ironing out the social differences which still exist. It is naturally important to help children so that they are not doomed to school failure from the very first day in the junior school. Hence, the wish to exploit the nursery school as a tool in developing children's cognitive growth is easily understandable.

In approaching the question of what sort of content nursery schools should have, we thus have to consider the question of how the schools function today for children with differing social and cultural backgrounds. The critical question being : Do particular groups of children manage better at school compared with children from other social and cultural backgrounds ?

ON SCHOOL FAILURE, SOCIAL BACKGROUND, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

There still exists a great deal of social inequality in our society. Unlike earlier times, however, it is not so much the family into which people are born that determines their share of privileges, but more the individual's own education and abilities. Hence, education has become a very important factor in the attempt to achieve equality. Since the Second World War, Norwegian educational policy has aimed at providing equal opportunities for all, irrespective of background factors, to get a higher education. In this respect, the Norwegian policy has been in accordance with official international policy, as expressed, e.g. through the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It must have come as an unpleasant surprise that a series of American investigations in the 60's and 70's concluded that the American school system functions as a direct support of the class society. In these reports a large amount of data on just the type of factors we have mentioned were compared with each other, i.e. children's cognitive achievements, social and economic background and school programme. Grant (8) summarised the main conclusions in the following manner :

1. Family background factors are if anything, even more strongly related to pupil achievement than Coleman originally asserted. It is the "human resources" other children bring to school rather than the traditionally defined services provided by the school which affect pupil achievement.

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2. It is highly uncertain at this point which school policies, if any, can compensate for the inequalities in cognitive skills between rich and poor children that are apparent at the time they enter school.

We will not discuss this research in any detail, only mention that, as one might expect, it provoked a general and critical debate on the very question of educational opportunities in the USA, in Europe, in Scandinavia, and in Norway.

With this background, optimism is inevitably created when a group of researchers claim to have found a political and pedagogical solution which will make it possible for lower class children to take advantage of the educational system. According to these researchers, children who come from lower class homes receive so little intellectual stimulation that their cognitive development stagnates. Hence these children cannot cope with school and consequently, the solution is to compensate for the deficient home environment. Cognitive training programmes for small children, for an hour or two every day, or twice a week or month, or in the form of a summer course, could therefore represent possible means by which low status children could be given the chance to start on an equal basis with the middle class children when they begin school.

An educational tradition, with a goal of creating pedagogical interventions which could, in an effective way, compensate for the assumed cognitive deprivation, has developed. This development was especially prominent in America, but also occurred in Europe. New concepts such as "cultural deprivation", "language deprivation", and "social deprivation", etc., came into use. It is not our intention here to consider this research in any detail, our aim is to study on which values and premises it is based. Let us first consider the problem the children, for whom these compensatory programmes are meant, represent.

In Norway, the problem of underprivileged children is not as serious as in other countries which have greater class differences, slum areas, etc. However, in Norway too, it is still the middle class children who do best at school, and consequently enter higher education. (9)

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This state of affairs was testified to in a recent Norwegian investigation on the relationship between a person's social background and his situation in adult life. 3,472 male subjects participated, 1,324 born in 1921, 1,094 borr in 1931 and 1,054 born in 1941. They were all interviewed in 1971. Thus it was possible to collect information about the connection between social background and situation later in life across a 50 year period.

On the basis of the data obtained in the study, Ramsøy (10) concludes with regard to the relationship between original social background and life situation in adulthood in the period from 1921 to 1971 :

1. Because of the profound changes regarding production and division of labour in society, there was an increased mobility frequency, an improvement of educational opportunities, and a greater chance to achieve a higher standard of living, however;

2. inequality regarding people's chances of success on the basis of their original social background remained constant.

In one of the part-studies from this project, where the men's education, profession and social status were analysed, the conclusion is reached that social inequality has been and continues to be, to a large extent, manufactured by the educational system itself. (11) It appears that children's social background is extremely important right from the beginning of their school career. (12)

In a Norwegian investigation, it was revealed that a larger proportion of children from working class backgrounds were registered in the so called "not-ready-for-school" group. (12) Children's ability for conceptual thinking and language use are, of course, critical dimensions when judging if a child is ready for school or not. It is thus reasonable to assume that each year children begin school with greater or lesser language and communication difficulties. These difficulties may perhaps come about because of homes using an impoverished language, or they may be caused by difficulties in enunciation, difficulties in articulating particular language sounds, etc. That language problems are real among small children was also reflected by the fact that 41.8%, 14.5% and 8.2% of Norwegian pre-school teachers said that they would need assistance from a speech therapist 1-2 times a year, 1-2 times a month, and 1-2 times a week, respectively. (13)

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It is an important socio-educational task to help these children. However, the critical question is whether the compensatory educational programmes represent adequate and relevant help for the children and their parents ?

Leading educational sociologists have been concerned by the problem of what might be done to prevent the schools maintaining a system of social inequality. In many countries, educational sociologists are divided into two main groups on the basis of what they consider as the best means of attacking the problem. One strategy is to improve the school system itself, and they argue that the most significant difference would be attained by getting away from the traditional curricular groupings. Others emphasise the development of stimulation or compensatory programmes for small children.

Hernes is one of the Norwegian sociologists who has argued for the latter strategy in order to remove social inequality. (14) He writes :

"One could even argue that the establishment of the 9 year obligatory school in Norway, was a case of expansion at the wrong end. The two final years contribute to the widening of the gap rather then establishing equality in the beginning". (our italics).

In the present report, it is impossible to consider all the programmes which have been established and tried with groups (*) from potential school failure. It will suffice to mention that compensatory programmes vary greatly. Some of them are based mainly on Piaget and cognitive developmental psychology. Others underline the importance of creating a learning situation in which the child will be rewarded for "correct" behaviour. Furthmore, there are considerable differences about how the staff should behave towards the child. There is, for example, no agreement as to whether the child or the adult should instigate activity. There are also differences as to what sort of equipment is considered best to encourage cognitive growth.

In spite of considerable differences, we would nevertheless claim that the programmes have essential aspects in common. In what follows, we will therefore examine the premises on which the compensatory approach is based. This analysis is important, because even though such programmes have not yet been implemented in Norwegian nursery schools, there is today in Norway a strong interest in solving exactly the same problems which people have tried to solve through compensatory means.

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* of small children, in order to protect those from the lower classes.....

In addition, a few isolated programmes have existed in Norway which resemble the more systematic stimulation programmes. It is also important to notice that the existence of the compensatory programmes have strongly influenced the general attitude to the parents of small children as well as to children and their needs in early childhood. These programmes and the related research have led to a more serious interest in the school situation of those children usually termed failures. Furthermore, the programmes have led to a greater interest in the cognitive growth of all children. This was explicitely reflected in a Norwegian project. (15) In this investigation, carried out amongst Norwegian nursery school personnel, it seems that a large proportion of the teachers would like the programme for six-year-olds to be more "cognitively oriented". 75% of the nursery school teachers and 70% of the heads of the nursery schools expressed the opinion that society should offer six-year-olds some form of so-called pre-school classes. (It should be noted that, in Norway, children begin school at seven). Finally it is worth mentioning in this connection that the "compensatory" approach is concerned with encouraging exactly those abilities which are considered the most important in our society in general. Hence, it is not surprising that, at the various levels of political decision-making, there exists an understanding of the importance of the cognitive training of young children, whilst the need for other kinds of opportunities (social, emotional, etc.) are less generally accepted.

With this background, we will now examine the premises and values on which the compensatory approach depends. It is possible on the basis of such an analysis to evaluate the fruitfulness of the compensatory approach with respect to improving the living conditions of small children.

WHAT DO FUTURE "SCHOOL FAILURES" LACK ?

An examination of the different compensatory programmes reveals that they are based on the following two assumptions :

1. That there is something wrong not with the schools but with the so called low status children and/or their parents.

2. That the children will compensate more easily for their deficiencies if they are reached early enough.

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It is quite clear that nursery schools run according to concepts underlying the compulsory school will have a more limited effect - especially in comparison with the child/adult interaction described above - and which has been, until now, common in the Norwegian nursery school.

Let us therefore examine the first and most basic assumption : Are so-called low status children and/or their parents cognitively deprived ? And what is it these children and their parents possibly lack, if anything ?

The very concept of "compensatory education" implies that there is something deficient in the children or in their families. It is this "something" which hinders the child from managing adequately at school, and which has to be compensated for.

What, exactly, is it assumed that "low status" children do not have ? Having examined the content of the various programmes, we have found that there seems to be a general belief that there is something wrong with the conceptual and language abilities of low status children. (16)

However, in order to assert whether particular groups of children have language or conceptual deficiences, it is necessary to know how so-called "normal" children think and communicate. Hence we have to know : How do "normal" children develop conceptual thinking and language abilities ? How do they learn language and new concepts ? We have also to know if there is a connection between normal development and educational procedures. May a deficient "normal development" be compensated for by pedagogical interventions ? Finally : What is it that characterises a stimulating environment, and what is a satisfactory language and conceptual development ?

In what follows, we will approach these critical questions - firstly by giving a description of important features concerning the development of language and thought in childhood.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Apart from various didactic learning-oriented traditions, it is the Piagetian tradition which has explored, most systematically, children's conceptual development. Regarding children's language acquisition, however, other research traditions have contributed more.

As we have seen in Norway, the recent debate has been concerned with such issues as whether six-year-olds require a school-preparation programme, on the transition from nursery school to school, etc. We will therefore consider the oldest children of the pre-school age-group and ask : How does an ordinary six-year-old really think ?

ON CONCEPTS WHICH ARE LACKING

How "adult" is a five or six-year-old intellectually ? Ordinary, everyday language does not seem to present any problem for a six-year-old. Six-year-olds demonstrate that they want "proper" answers to their questions. However, a crucial question is : Does the child experience the world in the same way as we adults, only with less experience and knowledge ? Studies within the Piagetian tradition have revealed that adults have a number of fundamental concepts which young children have not developed. (17) Research has shown that children do not lack specific information, but in fact they think in a manner qualitatively different from adults. (18) In order to understand how children experience the world, and which aspects of their environment are important to them, it is necessary to take these differences between children and adults into account.

Studies within the Piagetian tradition have demonstrated that children under 7 or 8 years have difficulty in discriminating between appearance and reality. How things look and how they really are. (19) This is especially the case in children's understanding of physical concepts, i.e. conservation of amount of liquid. (20)

If we assume that the children in the experimental situation understand the questions adequately, (21) we may conclude that the younger children allow themselves to be deceived by the appearance of the amount of water, instead of logically thinking how much it really is. (22) This applies not only for children's estimation of amount, but also for their judgement of various other physical concepts such as number, weight, volume, length, etc.

Another striking characteristic of the cognitive functioning of young children, is egocentricity. Children seem to lack the ability to conceive a situation or a problem from various angles, they only see it in their own perspective without being aware of how others may experience it. This phenomenon causes frequent conflicts between adults and children, when the adults are not aware of the fact that children actually do not have the ability to decentrate. (23)

Piaget is of the opinion that children's language is of two kinds - egocentric speech and socialised (or decentrated) speech. (24) In egocentric speech the child pays no or little attention to the listener, he pays little attention to whom he is speaking, and does not even seem to care if there is anybody who is listening at all. He talks to himself, and anyone else who is accidentally present will do as a listener. Egocentric

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speech also occurs among youth and adults, but to a much lesser extent. Egocentric speech concerns the child's own thought and activity, and the child is not addressing himself to anyone in particular. He or she speaks in the presence of others, a quasi-conversation or "collective monologue". This particular form of egocentricity results from cognitive limitations of the child, and the child is totally unable to take the listeners perspective. (25) However, the egocentric speech seems to represent a contribution to the child's own activity and cognitive development. (26)

Socialised language serves communication with others e.g., when the child tells about something, criticises, requests something, demands, asks or answers questions. At this stage, according to Piaget, the child takes others into account when he speaks, and language develops other functions than merely that of supporting the child's own activity, it also functions to convey messages to others. (27)

In the language of 2-3 year-olds the word "I" is very frequently used, whilst later the pronouns "we", "you", "he", "she" and "it" increase in use. According to Piaget, socialised, decentrated language does not dominate before the age of 6 or 7.

It must be mentioned that Piaget's description of egocentric language has been criticised. For example, Vygotsky claimed that even though a large proportion of the 3 year-olds' speech does not seem to pay any attention to others, the function of the speech itself is nevertheless social. The child wants to be understood, or rather he assumes that he is understood, rather than not being concerned about the listener. (28)

In spite of the criticism of Piaget's descriptions, there is no doubt that young children's lack of ability to decentrate and take the perspective of others is characteristic of their language use and communication. With respect to physical concepts, speech, rules in play and games, and moral judgements, it is found that children have a characteristic way of functioning in that they demonstrate an egocentric attitude. The egocentric attitude does not imply that young children are less social than older children, but that they take as granted that others share their own experienced "here and now". Young children thus have limited possibilities in avoiding misunderstandings and conflicts in situations where it is necessary to consider different opinions, capabilities or intentions. (29)

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An examination of various compensatory programmes revealed that they are based on the assumption that low status children, compared with middle class children, lack exactly this ability to decentrate. Since school activities require that children are able to adopt different perspectives, as well as to think abstractly about their own experiences, a tendency toward egocentricity may easily result in school failure. It is for this reason that language training in structured teaching situations is central in the programmes.

The critical question, then, is if a more decentrated way of communicating may be learnt in this manner ? Piaget has not studied what may be achieved by employing such methods. (30) He has been concerned by the general influences of the environment, and has studied the child in interaction with his natural environment, without being especially concerned by specific factors of the type that represent training in conceptual thought, language training etc. (31) In this connection, it has to be stressed that many of the programmes are clearly not in accordance with the principles Piaget claims are necessary for natural development, for example, from a more egocentric to a more decentrated way of behaving. Since it has been demonstrated that small children do not employ the same logical categories as adults, (32) it becomes very unlikely that children can learn to use adult concepts directly, or that adults may teach children to think as they do. (33) However, according to Piaget, the children themselves have the ability to construe new concepts. Thus, psychologically, the child is his own teacher. (34) The knowledge and insight an adult has acquired in order to cope with his physical and social world. (35) The child will develop these strategies through experience in the course of time. Rather than repetitive training of skills and ready-made "correct" knowledge in more or less artificial contexts, the children should be stimulated and encouraged in their own activities in coping with their natural physical and social environment.

The main guideline should be the interest the child shows for the "play", the "task", or for the "problem". (36)

The question : "Can we teach a child to think ?", requires the answer 'no'. We cannot teach them thinking, but the children themselves manage to construct meaning and arrive at their own understanding of problems. The role we adults play is one of co-actors in the child's world, and the child as a participant in ours. Social experience is thus the key to the development of language and conceptual thought. Language and communication competence evolves through natural usage and not as a result of the "learning" of particular words and expressions. (37)

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It should be mentioned in this connection that, within the Piagetian school, it has been argued that interaction situations involving conflicts between the perspectives of the participants is a necessary pre-requisite for developing the ability to decentrate. (38)

It was mentioned above that the child's everyday environment probably exposes him to interaction situations involving conflicts. An analysis of the effects upon development of conflicts in everyday interaction would, however, be outside the frame of the present article, and we will return to the question whether children from particular groups communicate and use language less efficiently because of their social background.

Within the Piagetian school, little attention has been paid to this type of problem. (38) Basil Bernstein however, has analysed the extent to which social inequality leads to particular environmental conditions, which again lead to children developing different language use and communication. (40) His key concepts - "restricted" and "elaborated" codes - have striking similarities to the egocentricity concept. Because many of the compensatory programmes are inspired by Berstein's earlier work, we will briefly present some of his ideas.

Berstein claims that modern society requires two types of language codes. Firstly, the language of everyday life. This language use rests on the tacit assumption that one is talking to people who share the same experiences as oneself (cf. Piaget's concept of egocentricity). This type of language is direct and restricted with regard to nuances in choice of work and expressions. This language is termed "public language" or the "restricted code". The other language is termed "formal language" or the "elaborated code". The elaborated code takes into account the differences between the sender's and the receiver's experiences. The sender and the receiver assume that they do in fact have different frames of reference. (cf. Piaget's concept of decentration)

Which code do we mainly use ? Bernstein claims that this is determined by factors such as professional life, education, and the relationship between family members. It will, however, mainly be members of the working class who, because of their education and the character of their work, will mostly employ the restricted code. The middle classes on the other hand will, because of the character of their work and education, more easily acquire and use both the restricted and the elaborated code. This implies that the middle class child learns to use two codes, while the working class child only acquires one of them before he begins school.

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Researchers such as Bereiter and Engelmann are inspired by the work of Bernstein. They suppose that the working class children do not do well at school mainly because only the restricted code is available to them. As school subjects are to a large extent communicated by means of the elaborated code, the lower class children have difficulties in understanding what the teacher says and what the school books are trying to get across. Bereiter, Engelmann and others have developed educational programmes which are aimed at preparing working class children to understand and cope with the teaching in an adequate manner. Whether such an approach will be successful is, of course, dependent on whether Bernstein's assumptions are correct. The researchers involved with compensatory education have not been much concerned in mapping the language abilities of low status children. Thus we have to return to Bernstein's own work as well as to a variety of other research traditions in order to inspect this underlying assumption. Within the limits of the present article a review of the relevant research cannot possibly be given. (For a review, see e.g. Baldwin, T., McFarlane, P. & Garvey, C. (1971), Ginsberg, H (1972), and Nafstad, H & Blakar, R. (1975)). (41)

However, we will here conclude on the basis of recent research into children's general language competence, their comprehension and their use of language, that it is extremely difficult to give an unequivocal answer to the general question if (and how) working class children are handicapped in respect to language. Furthermore, the issue concerning so-called "language deprivation" demands much more complex approaches than the compensatory programmes have represented. Firstly, research shows that one has to differentiate between groups of children across several dimensions. The most simple classification would be of the following kind :

Cultural group / Soc./econ. status :	White	Black	Puerto Rican	etc.
Middle class				
Working class				
Extreme poverty				

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Furthermore, one has to be careful about generalising findings from one country to another. It is, for instance, reasonable to assume that in countries with greater social inequality, there will exist greater differences in the way young children communicate and use language. In Norway, several studies have been conducted in order to find out about dialects and differences between dialects. (42) However, we know of only one investigation which refers directly to whether children grew up in different communicative environments. (43) In this study, the communication pattern and use of language of parental couples from differential social background (city versus countryside/working-class versus middle class) were compared with respect to their degree of decentration, their ability to endorse adequate language contacts, etc.

In this connection we will conclude that the most serious objection to the compensatory approach is that relevant research points to the conclusion that low status children are perhaps not suffering from language deprivation at all. It is rather that they have other ways of communicating, and that these differ fromthose of their middle class peers. Further, these problems of applied psychology (compensatory programmes) may in part reflect problems within the modern psychology of language itself. As Rommetveit has argued, modern psychology of language has evolved as a synthesis of linguistics and individual psychology. (44) One particular disadvantage which results is that it has been extremely difficult to develop a social understanding of the language processes. The dominant traditions within the psychology of language have been characterised as follows : Language has not been studied whilst it was in use, language has not been studied in natural contexts, and the communication perspective has been neglected in the study of language. (45) A peculiar result of this state of affairs is that we know, for instance, how large a vocabulary a child has at the various age levels, but we have little idea about how the child uses language in various situations to impart messages which are important to him.

In one of his more recent works, Berstein himself claims that the underlying assumption in the compensatory programmes, that low status children can be classified as having a language deficiency, is incorrect. (46) Berstein states that even though a child mainly makes use of a restricted code, this does not mean that the child is non-verbal or that he is deprived in the linguistic sense. The child has exactly the same implicit understanding of the linguistic rule system as any other child. Berstein emphasises that the use of the

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restricted code implies that the number of situationsand conditions in which the child employs the ebaborated code are restricted. In other words, the child does not lack the ability to produce the elaborated code. It only means that children show differences as to when they feel that it is natural to use this code.

If Bernstein's latter assumption is correct, it is no wonder that so many of the compensatory programmes have not been very successful. The isolated training on specific linguistic or grammatical aspects in more or less artificial situations is doomed to fail if Berstein's view is correct. If the aim is to get the child to use the elaborated code more frequently, it will be necessary to make the child undertand why he should use the elaborated code in more situation than she or he normally feels to be natural. In other words, it is social situation and the child's experiences of them which must form the central field of operation.

Finally, it is important to be aware of the limits of even the contributions of the Piagetian tradition with regard to planning of an environment and a policy of young children. As mentioned at the beginning, this school of research has been interested in differencesbetween cognitive functioning of adults and young children. As young children are obliged to live in and cope with a world which is primarily built to suit the cognitive capacity of adults (as well as their tasks and duties in society), the young children will always come short. However,such a description of the child in terms of "deficiences" is clearly not the whole story. Furthermore, within the compensatory approach in education some particular children are labelled as "double failures"because it is claimed they lack the critical characteristics and abilities of adults, and they even lack characteristics and abilities of their peers from the socio-culturally dominant groups. This way of considering the children may prove to be directly harmful. Would not the children have a better chance not only as children, but also as adults in the future, if one took as a point of departure what they do know and can master, rather than their deficiences ? A more adequate point of departure in pedagogical interaction with children might be that they, given their limited experiences, think, act, and communicate logically and adequately on their own premises. (47)

The task of the adult (e.g. the pre-school teacher) would then primarily be to try to understand the child's way of expressing himself. However, this would require from the adult a thorough knowledge and respect for the local, everyday social environment in which the child is integrated. This strategy, which takes as its starting point the everyday life of the child, requires the pre-school teacher to become a sort of environmental or milieu worker, who is able to explain, understand, and describe the environment in the way in which the child experiences it.

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It is evident that this strategy will radically deviate from dominant current practice and theory concerning children and pre-school systems (e.g. as experimented in the various compensatory programmes). The main purpose of our relatively recently launched project is, thus, to demonstrate what this strategy really involves with regard to the particular socio-cultural differences found in Norway.

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